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ABSTRACT

Taking an ethnomethodological perspective, this paper addresses itself to the central question of how meanings are constructed by members to create social reality. Here, the interest lies in explicating the interpretive procedures used by the classroom teacher in constructing pupil categorizations. As a specialist, the teacher is expected to be able to detect and assign significant features of children's routine acts to both social (behavioral) and functional (performance) categories. The paper begins by discussing methods used in data collection. These include introspection, role-taking, and the analysis of taped accounts. The procedures used by the actor-teacher to construct a social reality for a second grade class are examined and are documented by ongoing accounts and retrospective conversations. Critical behavioral distinctions made by the teacher are, among others, the 'hyper', the 'imaginative', and the 'flexible', child. Those distinctions which pertain to function or performance are the 'slow learner', the 'sharpie', and the 'conservative' child. Of particular interest is the teacher's interpretation of children's routine acts and performances in light of existing categorizations. Another area of concern deals with change in category interpretation. It appears that reinterpretation of already assigned categories occurs only when children continuously act or perform in a contradictory way. (Author)

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Squaring the peg or rounding the hole: teacher categorization of pupils' routine acts

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Squaring the peg or rounding the hole: teacher categorization of pupils' routine acts

Taking an ethnomethodological perspective which focuses on problems of meaning in everyday life, this study is concerned with the explication of interpretive procedures used by a classroom teacher in constructing pupil categorizations.

Labeling and the affects of labeling on an individual's behavior, self-image, and opportunity structures have received considerable attention in the literature (Lemert 1972, Rosenthal 1968, Becker 1964, 1963, 1960, Goffman 1963). For ethnomethodologists, categorization or "doing labeling" is but one of the techniques actors use to create and sustain their social order.

Why do we label? In social situations people are able to act together with relative ease because they share common understandings of what each person is supposed to do (Cicourel 1972: 248). The flow of social interaction is facilitated because members take things for granted and make events recognizable to each other. Categorizing is a process which 1) eases social intercourse, 2) serves as a short-hand system of communication, 3) cuts through the confusion of everyday life to simplify social interaction, and 4) enables us to describe individuals by categories which carry anticipatory behavior and expectations.

Cognitive categories of persons likely to be encountered are established by social settings. For example, members of an alcoholic community speak of "retreads", "winos", "earth people",

and "crazies" (Volpe 1975). Referential terms heard in prisons include "square Johns", "thieves", "gorillas" (Cressey 1973). Dope addicts refer to "the hustle", "the cop", and "getting off" (Agar 1973).

There is ample data to support the notion that interacting members in a society categorize, and that categorizations are germane to specific social and institutional settings. We then ask, how are these categorizations made? What interpretive and accounting procedures does an actor use to sustain social reality?

In an attempt to answer these questions, I entered a private educational institution as an observer to gather data on the process by which one second grade teacher assigned and sustained pupil categorizations. Listening to teachers' conversations, I learned that the teacher, like other specialists, is expected to become familiar with the labels used in that particular setting (see Rosenthal 1968, Rosenhan 1973, Agar 1973, Goffman 1961). Part of the professionalization process, it seems, is 1) discerning which labels are deemed appropriate, 2) applying the labels to clientele, and 3) sharing the labels with other members of the professional community. From my observations in the school and retrospective conversations with the teacher, it became quickly apparent that the labeling process serves important functions here as in other institutional settings and is used continuously for diagnosing, placement, and treatment.

In an educational setting a teacher is expected to detect and assign significant features of children's behavior to categories. Such assignments are to be utilized for official purposes, e.g., school records, parent-teacher conferences, referrals to outside professionals, and for the teacher's personal use in the everyday world of "teaching." My task in this study of pupil categorization was to discover how this actor (teacher) goes about the task of investigating the scenes of children's behavior in the classroom so that she is able to see and report patterning and structure in those scenes for herself and for her professional colleagues.

The study was begun in mid-January and was concluded at the end of the 1975 school year. The decision to initiate the study at mid year was based on two assumptions: 1) the teacher would have had ample time to "get to know" patterns of behavior of each of her pupils, and 2) as a result of teacher-staff interactions the teacher would have had one semester to become familiar with the institutional expectations of pupil categorization.

Methodology

I learned about the interpretive procedures used by the teacher to construct pupil categorizations through visits to the classroom and retrospective conversations. The classroom visits were followed by taped interviews with the teacher in her home. The relaxed home setting, away from the institution,

facilitated the flow of conversation which focused on accounts of children's behavior. The ongoing accounts of pupil categorizations, combined with retrospective conversations and a card sorting technique provided data on the interpretive procedures used by the teacher to assign children's routine acts to categories.

During the data gathering process three research problems emerged: 1) once the categories had been named (identified) by the teacher, what were her meanings for each of the terms, 2) after the teacher's meanings were clarified, what interpretive resources were used by her to assign a child to each of the categories, and 3) if the teacher's categorizations differed from official labels, how did this teacher reinterpret her categories to fit into the model espoused by the institution.

Findings

Naming the categories.

Teachers are expected by administrators, colleagues, and parents to assess pupils for academic performance and general schoolroom behavior. By January, this teacher, complying with institutional and parental expectations, had assembled a repertoire of functional (her term) and social (her term) categories which she used to define children's behavior in the classroom.

In the social realm the teacher detects critical behavioral distinctions which account for the assignment of rou-

tine acts into such categories as "hyper", "conservative", "imaginative", and "creative"; on the functional (academic performance) level she assigns children to categories of "sharpie", "conservative", "imaginative", and "creative".

Although the teacher speaks of two major divisions of pupil categorization - functional and social - the data indicates that only two terms reflect qualities of mutual exclusivity. For this teacher, 'hyper' behavior is considered applicable only on the social level, and 'sharpie' behavior only on the functional level. In contrast, all the remaining terms, 'conservative', 'imaginative', 'creative' occur on both social and functional levels. The significance of this finding is that although 'creative','imaginative', and 'conservative' behavior have distinguishing social and functional characteristics, the generalized meanings of these categories allow for an interchangeability of terms so that a single term, e.g., 'creative', can account for both social and functional behavior. This evidence suggests,then, that manifestations of 'imaginative', 'creative', and 'conservative' behavior are seen by the teacher as affecting both the academic and social aspects of life.

Originally, the teacher had designated only two major categories (social and functional) to define and organize her children's behavior. But it became evident during the retrospective conversations that she was using still another categorical distinction to account for pupils' routine acts.

This more encompassing category, which superimposes all others, is based on degrees of flexibility or her assessment of children's reasonableness within the classroom setting. All of the children are categorized on this level as either 'flexible' or 'inflexible'.

Conceptual meanings and interpretive procedures of categorization.

With this information in hand, my task was to discover the conceptual meanings of each of these categories and the ways in which the teacher assigned each of the children to one or more categories. To elicit data pertaining to the meaning of each conceptual category, I asked the teacher the following types of questions:

> How does a 'hyper' ('sharpie') child behave?
> Why is Danny 'creative' and not 'imaginative'?
> How is the behavior of 'conservative' children similar to or different than that of 'imaginative' children?

To discover the actor's interpretive procedures of categorization, I drew upon Garfinkel's (1967:78) model of documentary methods of interpretation which suggests that we treat an actual appearance as 'the document of', as 'pointing to', as 'standing in behalf of' a presupposed underlying pattern. Garfinkel tells us that not only is the underlying pattern derived from its individual documentary evidences, but the individual documentary evidences, in their turn, are

interpreted on the basis of 'what is known' about the underlying pattern. Each is used to elaborate the other.

Data pertaining to the interpretive procedures used by the teacher to assign children to categories was obtained through the analysis of retrospective conversations, ongoing accounts of children's routine acts, and responses to such open-ended questions as:

> Do you think Richard was 'hyper' today? Why?
> Can Aretha be 'conservative' and 'creative' at the same time?
> Cindy seemed out of sorts this afternoon, is this unusual?
> Three of the boys spent a lot of time in the closet during free time today, how did you feel about that?

My field notes and an analysis of the taped conversations have provided the following data concerning the teacher's conceptual meaning of each category, and the interpretive procedures she uses to assign children to each of the categories.

Category:	<u>Flexibility</u>*
Definition:	The emotional ability to cope with things..... This child can be reasoned with and doesn't get "bent out of shape" easily.
Documentary Evidences:	The child is "artful" in handling social situations and can adjust to changes in the academic routine. The child doesn't get upset easily, and if frustrated, bounces back with little or no difficulty. The child absorbs things without getting "bent out of shape," e.g., becoming tearful, withdrawn, argumentative.

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* All children in the class are categorized as 'flexible' or 'inflexible'. Sometimes a child can be 'flexible' in a social way but 'inflexible' on the performance level; the reverse is also possible.

Category: Inflexibility

Definition: This child cannot be reasoned with.

Documentary Evidences: If things don't go right the child gets "bent out of shape", gets demolished. Manifestations of being "demolished" include moodiness, withdrawal, argumentativeness, tearfulness.

"When I try to reason with this child it is like coming up against a brick wall. I have to meet him/her 99% of the way. This is a strongly opinionated child."
"There are two forms of 'inflexibility', argumentativeness and withdrawal; both behaviors indicate being "bent out of shape"."

Category: Hyper

Definition: Acts which are socially disruptive and destructive.
"When I see somebody goofin'.....I consider grotesque behavior 'hyper', which means any act which is so outlandish for the setting that it nearly blows my mind. I call this 'hyper' activity on this child's part because it is so out of character for what is supposed to be going on."

Documentary Evidences: Acts that are time wasters, that have no end product in sight. Such acts are destructive and are seen as 'hyper' activity. Acts which are disruptive for the individual or the group, i.e., sliding across the room on one's knees, chasing someone in the room, running into the closet, getting out of the seat a lot during the period designated for seat work, keeping someone else from completing his work, or acting out for no reason at all.

Category: Quiet Hyper

Definition: Acts which are not "super" disruptive in the classroom. These children do not disturb others in a noisy way so they are 'quiet hypers'.

Documentary Evidences: Children who "spin-off" in some direction that isn't too disruptive but who are not really being constructive either: e.g., getting someone who is not finished with his work to go

into the closet to try to set up a game situation; out of one's seat but not being noisy; socializing on the side; "traveling" in the classroom to one or two different people but doing it quietly.

Category: Sharpie

Definition: This is an imaginative, perceptive child.

Documentary Evidences: A child who does the work that is expected of him/her but then expands on it imaginatively or creatively and exhibits some originality and individuality.

Category: Conservative

Definition: These children are middle of the roaders; they always do what is expected of them. They know what is expected and what is acceptable behavior. They stay within the bounds of the social setting. It is a safe, secure role for many who want to be praised and believe they will be praised for doing what is asked of them.

Documentary Evidences: These children follow directions to the letter. They do everything in the order in which it is asked. They do not deviate or expand on any assignment. True'conservatives' don't vary at all from what is asked. They do not want any hostile action from the teacher or from their peers. They will back down in a conflict.

"'Conservatives' are hard workers, but I am concerned about them because they don't show me they are willing to stand up for their own convictions."

Category: Creative

Definition: "A child who comes up with things that are fantastically interesting, that no one else in the class has done, or at least has not done in that way."

Documentary Evidences: Creativity is seen in art work, written compositions, and dramatic play.

Category: Imaginative

Definition: "A child that does the work but adds an interesting focus that I have not considered and is more than acceptable."

Documentary Evidence: This child disregards directions and internalizes the meaning of the project to produce something that is very much his/her own. It is reflected in art work, and in activities that are not called for but are constructive - a different way of presenting material.

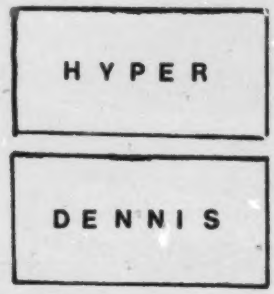
After obtaining this information on the teacher's conceptual categories, my next task was to discover how this teacher goes about linking routine acts in the classroom to her conceptual types of children. What resources does she use to see order and patterning in classroom events? Garfinkel (1967) suggests that we consider interpretive procedures as having reflexive features which link the properties of meaning to actual events. In this way appropriate surface rules are seen as relevant for immediate or future inference and action.

In an attempt to discover these properties, I devised a sorting system which consisted of one 5 x 8 index card for each of the categories listed above, and one 5 x 8 card for each of the 28 children in the class. The seven category cards were placed in a horizontal line on a table in the teacher's home. The teacher was then asked to consider each child in the class in light of these known categories. The category cards could be moved in any direction or superimposed upon

other cards. The teacher was not limited to these seven conceptual categories.*

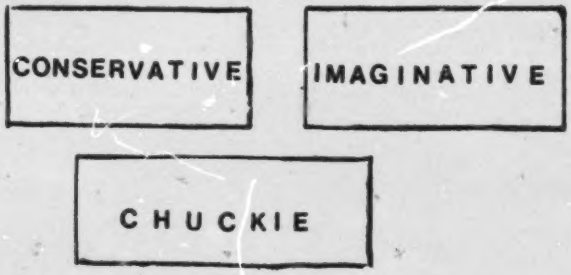
The sorting system provided information which suggests that the teacher has generated a model by which she fits children's routine acts into conceptual types.

1. Some children fit squarely into one category with little or no deviation.



2. Other children are split into two categories, with either a 50/50 or a 75/25 split.

an example of the 75/25 split:



"This split is relatively stable for this child because his 'conservative' qualities are so strong that they inhibit variations in his behavior. Although he has 'imaginative'qualities he cannot be considered a 'sharpie' because he is not that 'imaginative'. If his 'conservative', middle of the roader' qualities were not so well developed his 'imaginative' behavior could blossom and then he might flow into the 'sharpie' category."

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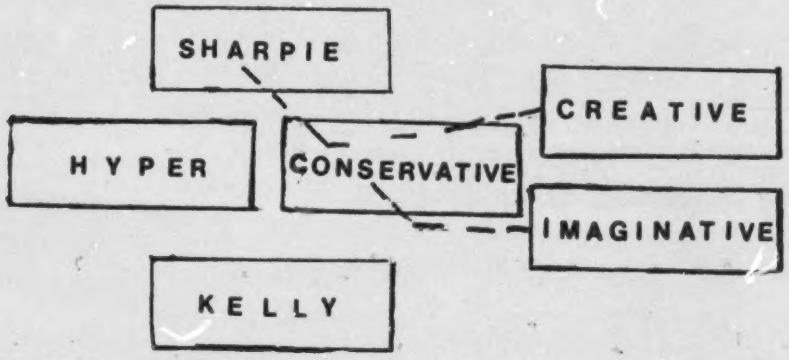
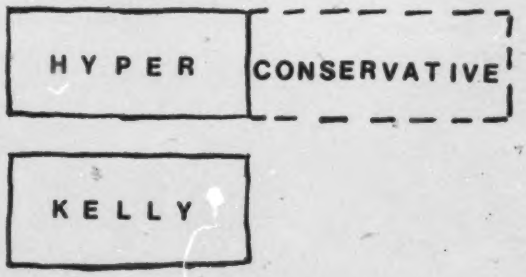
* No other categories were suggested by the teacher during the sorting process.

3. Still other children fall into two or three different categories. Their behavior tends to flow from one category to another. The changes in categorical arrangement are related to specific behavioral patterns. For example,

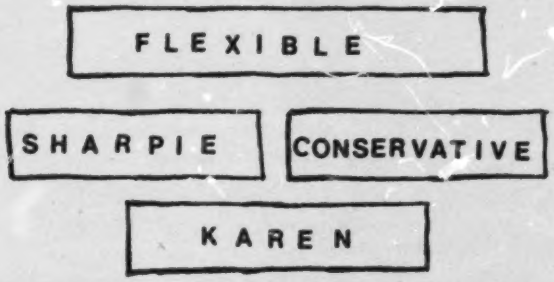


In this case when there is a 50/50 split between 'hyper' and 'conservative' behavior, the destructive influences are balanced by the constructive, inhibiting qualities of 'conservatism' and Kelly exhibits 'sharpie', 'imaginative', 'creative' behavior. But when 'hyper' qualities take over, she loses the 'sharpie', 'imaginative', 'creative' behavioral patterns and becomes disruptive, i.e., her work does not get finished, she is destructive to other children's property, and causes arguments with her peers. (Illustrated below)

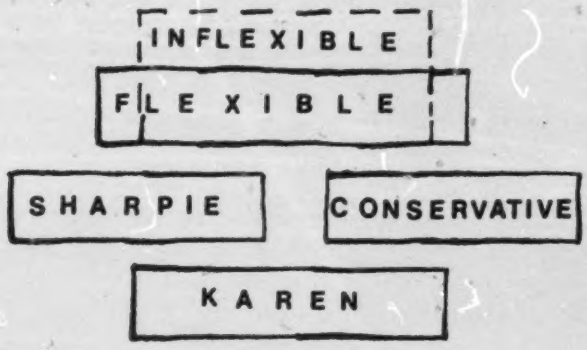


4. A few children are in a state of "categorical flux" and the teacher does not know how to conceptualize their behavior at this particular time.

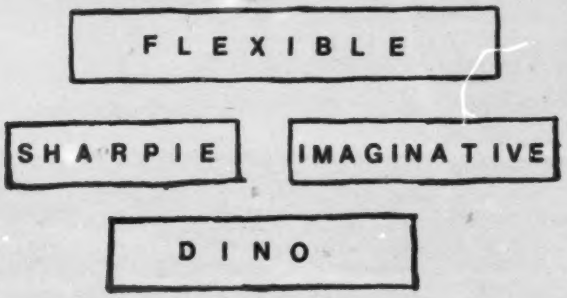
case #1
This child was categorized in the following way prior to parent-teacher conferences two months ago.



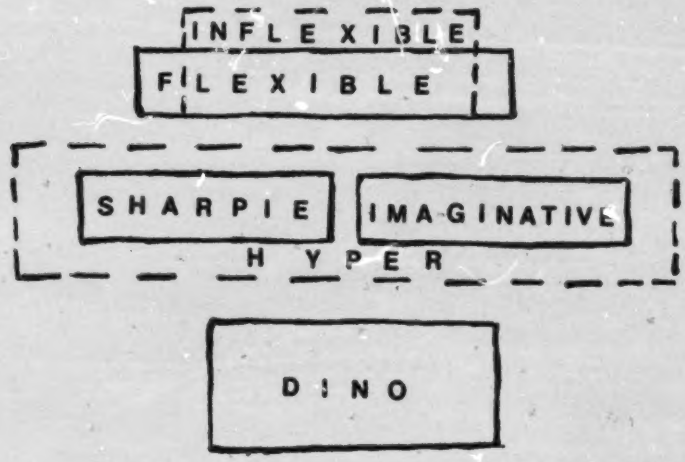
After the parent-teacher conference, when the mother discussed a specific problem the child was having in school which related to the teacher/pupil relationship, the teacher could no longer comfortably assign the child to the 'flexible' category. Until the teacher can account for the child's routine acts in the classroom in light of this new information, she conceives of the child as being somewhat 'inflexible'. See below.



case #2
Until a recent illness this child was seen as follows:



Since the illness, this child has become very ornery. 'Hyper' behavior is now superimposed on his 'imaginative', 'sharpie' qualities, and signs of 'inflexibility' occur more often since he has been sick. The teacher wonders if he still has not completely recovered; and she hesitates to categorize his present behavior because the changes may just be temporary ones.



Concluding Remarks

The data indicate that an actor's use of the documentary method of interpretation, i.e., treating appearances as 'pointing to' a presupposed underlying pattern, involves the search for an identified homologous pattern to account for a vast variety of totally different realizations of meaning. This is seen specifically with this actor's documentary evidences of 'hyper' activity, e.g., sliding on one's knees, traveling in the room, and causing flare-ups.

The results of this study support Sacks' (1974:219) rule of consistency which states that if a population of persons is being categorized, and if a categorization device has been used to assign a first member of the population, then that category or others of the same collection may be used to further assign members of the population. The collection in this case, seven conceptual categories, was effectively used by the teacher to classify all of the 28 children in the class.

We have also seen that a member's knowledge of the world is more or less ad hoc; in other words, he reconstructs some feature of an event so that it can be seen to fit the prescriptions of a rule, while he ignores those aspects of the event which do not fit the rule. This practice was particularly evident in this teacher's assignment of behavior to the 'imaginative-creative' categories. Instances which might have been considered 'hyper' activity were labeled 'imaginative' or 'creative' for those children who are thought of as 'sharpies' or 'conservatives'. This evidence supports the notion that the criteria of adequacy and rules of procedure in pupil categorization are only as good as they need to be for the individual actor.

The ad hoc procedures used to interpret routine acts to construct social reality, which go unquestioned by the actor, are the very processes which must be accounted for to significant others, i.e., the principal, parents, etc., in order to

maintain the social order of the institution. Administrators in an educational institution call for procedures of accountability when decisions for placement or treatment must be made. At this time a teacher asks herself, "What is expected of me?" "How do I convey information about my pupils' routine acts to other specialists and parents which will ensure proper placement and treatment for each child?"

Rosenthal (1968:108) suggests that teachers' assessments of pupils' academic performance are easier to fit into institutional categories, than are their assessments of social behavior. One possible explanation for this phenomenon might be the fact that at the close of any school year the main objective of the educational institution, that is, academic progress, comes into focus. Measurements of academic performance, rather than assessments of social behavior, are expected by staff and parents. The teacher responds to this expectation by translating both academic and social dimensions of pupils' routine acts into functional (academic performance) statements.

To illustrate, throughout the school year, Dennis, the knee-slider, the traveler, was categorized as a 'hyper' child who had periods of 'imaginativeness' and 'conservatism' during which he was seen as a quiet, diligent worker. The teacher interpreted his routine acts of functional and social behavior by the degree of his hyperactivity. In the <u>end</u> of the year report, however, she assesses Dennis' development in light of his academic progress, emphasizing functional and de-emphasizing social performance. She visualizes his behavior by the

amount of control, or 'conservatism', which he uses to channel his energies toward academic work.*

For this teacher, then, social reality in the classroom is sustained through the assignment of children's routine acts into social and functional categories. It appears, however, that when the teacher is called upon to make official judgments concerning pupil performance, the social categories no longer suffice. At this time, she feels the need to fit her interpretations of pupil progress into the institutional model of categorization. She does this by combining, and then translating, her information on social and functional performance into the institutional codes. Therefore, pupils who during the school year are categorized as 'hyper', 'conservative', 'creative', and 'imaginative', are assigned at the end of the year to numerical groups which are institutionally defined, e.g., 1 and 2 as good readers, 3 and 4 average readers, and 5 and 6 poor readers.

To summarize, we have seen how the teacher develops a variety of categorizations to account for children's routine acts. We have also learned from the teacher's ongoing accounts that she considers children's behavior to be a dynamic process which is subject to change. This process allows her to think of children as being capable of "flowing" from one category to another. As noted earlier, the teacher in this study perceives

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* The teacher in this study is very much aware of the ramifications of categorizing, particularly, the possible long term effects upon a pupil's academic career. Therefore, when asked to account for pupil progress, she utilizes social and functional information that points to positive aspects of children's behavior which are directly related to academic achievement.

a few children as being in a state of "categorical flux".

But, it was discovered that this teacher's perceptions of pupil fluency do not necessarily lead to recategorization. In fact, there seems to be considerable hesitation on her part to recategorize pupils. Although the problem of recategorization was beyond the scope of my study, I became interested in the process when I learned that only three out of twenty-eight children were recategorized during the school year. How categorical reinterpretation occurs is still unknown, and is a concern for future research. What does it take for the peg to remain square?

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